

DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY

From Mr. L. G. Wickham Legg
New College, Oxford

23 March 1946

Dear Professor

Many thanks for your letter of the 19th returning the draft of Pearson and the questions. I confess in turn to being a little surprised at your words that I "have carried the process of transforming" your "original obituary rather far." I have been carefully through the present draft with that which you sent to me on 12 February, and I cannot see that with the exception of five lines omitted on p. 3, & the transposition of the paragraphs on pp. 4 & 5, there is any material change beyond the additional paragraph of which you say that it is unfair to Laplace, Gauss & Edgeworth.

The reason for the excision of the lines on p. 3 is that Galton's work is fully described by George Darwin in the article on Galton in Supplement no 2, Vol. II. of the Dictionary, & that "[g. v.]" after Galton's name would send the reader to the fountain head in the Dictionary. And we have to keep a close eye on possible waste of space.

As to the new paragraph, the matter is more difficult. I quite see your point that Pearson's mathematical & statistical methods did not originally spring from him, but that he was following up ideas laid down by Laplace & Gauss in the realm of pure mathematics and (in a much less effective way) by Edgeworth in economics. But I do not think this is the real question for us here. After consultation with colleagues who are learned in such matters, I am convinced that it is important to state that Pearson was the first to apply these new mathematical methods to biology, just as Edgeworth did in economics, & that Pearson, by his vigour and energy, did far more than anyone else to compel scientific opinion to take up statistical studies & apply them.

In fairness to Pearson therefore I think the paragraph should be inserted. Can we redraft the sentences as follows:

"Nevertheless Pearson, treading in the footsteps of Laplace & Gauss, did for biological studies on a great scale what F. Edgeworth [q.v.] had already done tentatively in economics.

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He practically created a new discipline. When he began statistical work in 1893, there was no systematic instruction in statistical method in any university in England, nor were there any convenient text books or more advanced treatises, nor special journals. Fifty years later, instruction was being given at most universities, text-books & treatises were plentiful, and journals, other than that which he founded, were available. Even if his data & methods may nowadays be criticized, he remained the chief pioneer in this new discipline, which owes an immeasurable debt to his unbounded energy, and to the infectious enthusiasm inspired by his teaching."

I am sorry to appear to be making difficulties, but I must be satisfied that the article does justice to Pearson, & I must ask you to believe that I am not acting without taking advice from people who have made this subject their own. In view of the

controversial nature of the subject, I intend that the article before being printed, shall be shown to Professor Egon Pearson.

Yours sincerely
S. Wickham Legg